Ty Cashman
David Katz

Here's some weekend reading for you. Some of it picks up from threads you've already seen, but some interesting discussion of WER's niche, history, computerphobia, etc.

Mike
8/30/96

we.442: So, What Killed WER?

we.442.35: Kathy L. Dalton (kd) Sun 25 Aug 96 11:58

This thought is not fully formed but I think one thing that made life tough for WER was a dis-integration of its market niche.
One small example: the antipathy many of us felt for the embrace of information technology by CQ (yup, & here I am working away on my powerbook).

we.442.36: Steve Bjerklie (stevebj) Sun 25 Aug 96 12:24

<kd>, I think you're on to something. A lot of us felt left behind when WER swerved in the direction of high technology. But I can't quibble with the editors for their choice, since "Access to tools" was always WER's slogan. Computers are tools of a kind, of course.

I don't think the market niche disintegrated so much as changed. WER had to change with it. Problem is, not everyone in the niche changed. WER readers, more than readers of almost any other publication, feel they are part of a family, so some of us technology hold-outs felt betrayed when WER began flirting with other styles, other minds.

The challenge for the future is to create a new WER that keeps the family together while moving the family forward and to make a little money doing it. It can be done. The New Yorker does it. Harper's does it. WER can do it.

we.442.37: Meg Clark (megclark) Mon 26 Aug 96 15:36

Since there has been a lot of change over the past 25 years, our core market may not be the same as it was. Or the people may have changed. That's one thing necessary funds will go toward -- finding our niche in the 90s. Who wants to read WER these days, and where can we find them? That's what we need to determine.

we.442.38: Steve Bjerklie (stevebj) Tue 27 Aug 96 10:19

I cringe to bring up the word, but couldn't WER's niche be generically described as "the counterculture"?

Let me hasten to add that I define a member of the "counterculture" as anyone who's experimenting or implementing ideas and/or ways of living challenging the Conventional Wisdom.

we.442.39: Meg Clark (megclark) Tue 27 Aug 96 20:01

Yes, you are right, but "counterculture" names still cost money. We still have to find them.

we.442.40: David Finacom (keta) Tue 27 Aug 96 20:47

I think the group could be described as people who like to learn by, live by, know by "direct experience" instead of received rules, products or

beliefs. At one time this was a wide swath of the population, exploring spirituality, consciousness, how to raise food, build a boat, work -- anything and everything directly. Lovers of tools--for their tendency to put you in direct contact with reality.

I think a few things have happened. For one, this explosion of direct, attentive experiencing produced a ton of important, practical, useful insights and tools. Each of these has spun off on its own trajectory of being built upon by others. It's sort of like the history of Christianity. Said Christ, a profound direct experiencer in whom spirit was alive, by word and example, comes up with a whole new way of living. For a while his followers go around teaching by example themselves, and then eventually a huge institution grows up around the new ideas in which (paradoxically) direct experiencing is discouraged. Bill Gates, or somebody up there at Microsoft, had a run of brilliant programming ideas, probably very quirky and personal. Now we have a "this-is-the-way-it-is-done-join-or-else" juggernaut.

To some extent, we're more a society of implementers than creators sright now.

Second, one of the major insights of all the direct experiencing was, "Oh, shit, we're heading for hell in a bucket." Thus a lot of what was once joyful exploration has become anxious gloom. Where once many readers might have thrilled to read about a tool the'd never use, a science they'd never study, now perhaps fewer do because the scout heading back from that direction comes shaking his or her head.

Then there's the "split" you talk about, the wedge driven by technology.

To that I suggest a family analogy. My wife comes from a vast family. In each generation there are dozens of cousins as different as you could find. Each member has their favorites. When they get together between family gatherings, each has a circle of favorites, almost a clique. But at family gatherings, there's a hectic mingling as they take delight in exploring what they have in common with relatives they really don't care to socialize much with otherwise. The family seems to need both. The cliques carry it forward day to day, and the big gatherings carry it year to year.

On the one hand, the WER is "covering" the news being reported back from the hurtling fragments of the 60's "big bang." On the other, it seeks to foster and foment further direct experience creative bangs in our society.

The first project becomes ever more difficult until it becomes perhaps useless...unless...

The second one is chancy, because the new sparks are as likely to happen anywhere else as they are under WER ageis...yet...

we.442.41: David Finacom (keta) Tue 27 Aug 96 20:57

Unless: Ultimately the fragments that are hurtling apart will begin to coalesce again. When all the pårts begin to hurtle together again, the WER should be there to report on this, and help shape the synthesis.

Yet: just go down that list of greats that have passed through CQ/WER. Amazing, isn't it. Look how many great contributors to our society this begging entity has nurtured. If the institution continues, how many more Kevin Kellys, Howard Rheingolds, Art Kleiners, J Baldwins, Stewart Brands...and that's just among male editors. Arguably each of those people has made their most important contributions to society in some complex way both after/in-spite-of/because of CQ/WER.

ok, enough, my dinner is getting cold!

we.442.42: ankh (hank) Wed 28 Aug 96 11:37

>coalesce again

Still nobody using the Net newsgroup, though subscribers occasionally still surface to inquire what's up. I gave up forwarding their postings, but continue to wonder why nobody on staff is using it.

The tool's there, the subscribers are there, the cross-connections to all the recommendations made by huge numbers of people interested in tools of all sorts are there. Why aren't you there?

we.442.43: Steve Bjerklie (stevebj) Wed 28 Aug 96 11:51

>the '60s "big bang<
Nice analogy.

But I feel differently than you do about CQ/WER. Reading the New York Times and San Francisco Chronicle makes me feel like the world's going to hell in a bucket. CQ/WER always gave me a feeling of optimism, that maybe we still had a chance if we'd just *think* a little.

we.442.44: Jef Poskanzer (jef) Wed 28 Aug 96 13:59

Cocaine has that effect too.

we.442.45: Art Kleiner (art) Wed 28 Aug 96 21:10

Re computers: In retrospect, I think the reaction to the computer stuff had very little to do with our including them. The reaction had to do with a semantic issue: We merged CQ with the Software Review and changed the name.

Had we done this with ANY component of the mag's range - from restoration to the metric system - we would have alienated readers. The howls might have been pitched differently, but there would have been howls.

Access to tools is inherently optimistic.

Lapham and Brand and Harold Ross and other great editors have exceptional judgment. We may not agree with it, but it's exceptional. And they have great connections.

It's rare for people to have both, because great connections probably breed poor judgment in many people perhaps. And it's rare for such people to get a chance to edit.

we.442.46: Steve Bjerklie (stevebj) Thu 29 Aug 96 09:34

Never having had cocaine, I wouldn't know. But if it has the effect of making one feel cerebrally optimistic as does WER, then by comparison WER is the deal of the century. And we should send the magazine even more money so the CIA will be discouraged from taking over the franchise.

we.442.47: Bridled Swan (lucci) Thu 29 Aug 96 10:07

Is it possible to change the title of this topic?

we.442.48: Something's missing in the newspaper (boswell) Thu 29 Aug 96 17:29

Why do you wish to do so?

we.442.49: Bridled Swan (lucci) Thu 29 Aug 96 20:39

Hey you, there's a "spanking" topic in genx I want to introduce you to. ;-}>

we.442.50: Meg Clark (megclark) Fri 30 Aug 96 01:49

We can change the topic to "What revived WER?" But bosell is forbidden to respond. No offense.

we.442.51: slow six-feeler - please pass (bobtruck) Fri 30 Aug 96 07:45

Hank, or anyone who knows, what's the URL for the (WER?) Net newsgroup mentioned in #42?

we.437: Say Goodnight,WER
<linked 2 places>

we.437.364: Michael K. Stone (mkstone) Mon 26 Aug 96 11:29

> 350 In a like fashion, a magazine that has to beg is also a publication that needs to ask itself whether or not the people involved might be better off doing something else with their brief span of years.

"Begging" is beside the point. Buddhist monks have been doing it to good purpose for millennia. To echo <fom>, lots of publications "beg" from angels and within corporate budgets.

Some publications stay in the black by exploiting an audience's desire for mindless amusement. Some do it by demeaning some groups of people for the entertainment of others. Some do it by manufacturing desire for products that harm people or require unsustainable levels of consumption.

Some publications and organizations depend partly on donations. The Nation has lost money on operations for decades. Consumer Reports is now hitting up its readers. I give to the Red Cross because I like what they do with my money. Would I feel better about them if they stopped "begging" and restricted relief to people who could pay for it? No.

I have no problem spending some of my brief span of years with organizations which take (or require) donations as part of their business plan. It's a personal decision, but I'd rather give my limited years to that kind of publication than to one that didn't take donations but depended on consumption of products which degrade people's lives or the world.

It's not either/or: profit = good, "begging" = unworthy of our time and lives (nor, of course, does not-for-profit = virtuous or profitable = evil). The questions about reader donations for a magazine are whether the readers are willing to be donors, whether soliciting that support distracts from editorial purposes, and whether the total income, including both donations and other sources, is reliable and predictable enough to keep the business operating while supporting workers decently.

we.437.365: Michael K. Stone (mkstone) Mon 26 Aug 96 11:33

Re virtual offices, any way WER gets rolling again is doubtless going to involve experimentation, including different kinds of office arrangements. My first take is that The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog's operation may have been about as virtual as I'd like to see. We used a dozen domain editors and a couple hundred writers, the vast majority of whom never entered the office, or only came by once or twice. Lots of us moved regularly between home offices and Gate Five Road. But we had a central meeting place for collaborating and arguing face to face, the opportunity to gather two or three people for a quick discussion or decision, space to make

decisions while looking together at the same piece of copy or artwork, and a place where we could hold in our hands the thousands of physical items we sorted through and processed on our way to reviews.

we.437.366: Van der Leun (boswell) Mon 26 Aug 96 12:00

> And some magazines keep going by selling to their readers material that interests them in sufficient numbers to make them viable.
>
> I well understand the needs ot the staff and the board and the fanatical supporters to continue WER. But at the same time, it is best to admit that, for better or worse, its time has passed.

we.437.367: Leisure of the Theory Class (rbr) Mon 26 Aug 96 12:47

Say, Gerard, what do you think of Harper's?

we.437.368: tazmedia devil (jonl) Mon 26 Aug 96 13:40

Mike, ignore Boswell, he isn't feeling well. Keep on truckin'.

we.437.369: Van der Leun (boswell) Mon 26 Aug 96 14:56

> Harpers has one thing that WER lacks:
> Opinions by L. Lapham.

we.437.370: Roger Karraker (roger) Mon 26 Aug 96 15:00

Bug or feature, you decide.

we.437.371: Van der Leun (boswell) Mon 26 Aug 96 15:12

> Absolutely..

we.437.372: Meg Clark (megclark) Mon 26 Aug 96 15:32

Boswell, you never cease to amuse me. Fortunately, I don't take what you

we.434: Resurrection?

we.434.260: "Want to talk about the fifth most-talked-about man in talk radio?" (fom) Thu 15 Aug 96 15:35

If I were an entity looking for office space I would look in that nifty neighborhood in Oakland where Jerry Brown's building and the Amtrak station are. I would also look at Old Oakland. I think there's a lot of space for rent in Old Oakland.

we.434.261: Michael K. Stone (mkstone) Thu 15 Aug 96 19:36

Gate Five Road *is* an important symbol. I remember bicycling past #27 years before I ever worked there and getting a small thrill from knowing that -- right there, in that very spot -- the CQ/WER stew was being stirred. The romantic vision was lots simpler than the one that replaced it, but that's another story. Leaving this space does evoke more than just a change of address.

People sometimes forget that Whole Earth had a significant history before Gate Five Road. I'd like to think its history after Gate Five Rd. will also be memorable.

Anyhow, the funky Sausalito of WE's past has become a rather pleasant suburb with office rents averaging $2 a foot. I think it's time to strike the tents and take the show to new parts.

Thanks, everyone, for your leads here or those I've been sent by email. Keep 'em coming.

we.434.262: George P. Mokray (gmoke) Thu 15 Aug 96 20:22

What about Matthew Fox's college in Oakland. That might be an interesting mind meld.

we.434.263: David Finacom (keta) Sat 17 Aug 96 23:05

I was actually thinking of JerryBrownLand when I suggested Oakland.

In what part of the bay area is the long-term lead (sorry if I missed it above)

In the larger context of soliciting support, how much has been done to reach out beyond readers to the many prominent figures and entities with various historical links to the WER. Jerry Brown could plug revival on his radio show. The Sun would probably publish a letter about the situation. Real Goods might put a mention in their catalog. That's just 30 seconds of brainstorming.

we.434.264: George P. Mokray (gmoke) Sun 18 Aug 96 15:28

Good ideas. Reading Art Kleiner's book on corporate change it occurs to me

say to heart. Things are looking good for WER right now, and I'd like to see things continue in a positive direction.

There are a certain number of jobs that will require office time, and a certain amount of time any virtual workers will have to spend in the office, but the solution may be somewhere in between. We do need access for subscribers, advertisers, editors, contributors and anyone else willing to do business with us. But often home phones, email and fax can take care ot that.

we.437.373: ankh (hank) Wed 28 Aug 96 11:35

Advertisers redux?

we.437.374: Howard Rheingold (hlr) Thu 29 Aug 96 20:37

Mike Stone is awesome.

we.437.375: tazmedia devil (jonl) Fri 30 Aug 96 07:19

Second that!